



20 YEARS OF INTERNET **IN ZAMBIA**

How has journalism been impacted?

2014 is an important year for Zambia. This year the relatively small Southern African country joins the list of countries on the continent that have marked 50 years of independence. On 24 October the colours of the Zambian flag will fly high as the country not only celebrates, but also reflects on its successes and failures in the past half century.

By Elastus Mambwe

As part of its achievements, Zambia has often been hailed as having successfully transitioned into multiparty politics and liberalism without bloodshed, and having effected various policy shifts that have helped the country develop to what it is today. Two of the areas that have undergone this change are the media and the telecommunications sectors.

The relationship between the two sectors cannot be ignored. Increased investment, development and application of new communication networks and services in Zambia, as is the case in other African countries over the past 25 years, have led to a rise in the uptake of technological platforms provided by these networks in areas such as education, health, banking and very soon, government. For the media, operations are increasingly becoming dependent on the availability of these technologies, of which the internet is perhaps of primary significance.

The development of the internet in Zambia

While 2014 is Zambia's 50th jubilee, this year also marks 20 years of access to the internet for the country. Full access to the internet began in November 1994, making Zambia the fifth in Africa to do so, and only the second in sub-Saharan Africa, behind South Africa. This feat followed three years of development of an electronic mail network whose purpose was to serve non-commercial interests at the University of Zambia (UNZA) for the country (Robinson 1996: 191).

Robinson (1996) records that UNZA was provided a link to the internet via thrice-daily, computer-to-computer telephone calls, an arrangement that went on from 1991 to 1994 when full access was achieved (ibid. 194) under a special agreement with Rhodes University in South Africa. In 1993, a proposal was made to various international funding institutions to enable UNZA have direct link to the internet. The university set up a private company, Zamnet Communication Systems Limited, to spearhead this goal for connection and service provision early in 1994. That year, the ZAMNET project obtained 80% funding from the World Bank.

With Zamnet fully established and operational, the company set out to achieve its aim of distributing internet services to users throughout Zambia. It had two main objectives at the time; the first was to construct the hardware and technical support essential for the provision of a reliable full Internet service, and the second was to create a market for the internet service as well as engage necessary administrative staff and procedures, in order to make the company wholly self-sustaining a year after operation, and after the World Bank's seed money had been exhausted (ibid. 196 – 197).

With Zamnet as the first internet service provider

(ISP), Zambia was able to successfully connect to the internet in November 1994, marking the dawn of the internet age in Zambia. Today there are about 23 ISPs offering connection via Optic Fibre, VSAT, ADSL, Wi-fi Broadband, as well as mobile 3G, and 4G, and other technologies (ZICTA 2009).

The sector is today aligned within the framework of the National Information Communications Technology (ICT) Policy of 2006 that seeks to harmonise the contribution of ICTs to national development through creation of an innovative market and responsive competitive ICT sector (GRZ 2002: 1). Additionally, the Information and Communication Technologies Act of 2009 provides for the regulation of the entire ICT sector. The presence of these regulatory facilities has significantly helped increase the internet penetration, even though it is still low. Internet subscriptions have increased from 8 248 in 2001 to 92 642 at the end of 2012, (ZICTA 2009). Today, there are about 2.6 million internet subscribers, out of a population of 14 million, and 98% of these use mobile devices.¹

Internet and the media in Zambia

The internet is a technology that has brought about a lot of change in everyday life. Everyday processes in the work cycle have changed. For journalists, the use of the internet in their work is seen to have numerous benefits relating to news gathering, production and dissemination. Changes in practices are the most prominent. Journalists have had to adapt to this new digital age where there are many more tools available for them to get or tell a story, more interactivity with audiences and the almost non-existent restrictions on time and space.

Several writers have come to generally agree that ICTs such as the internet are supposed to be able to increase the efficacy of media practice (Heinonen 1999). This best describes the use of the internet by journalists in Zambia, where evidence suggests that in its 20 year history in the country, the internet has had a positive impact on the practice of journalism.

In a study on the use of ICTs, particularly the internet and cell phones, in a selected number of newsrooms in nine Southern African countries, the results from Zambia showed that journalists in general use and understand the importance of the internet in their day-to-day work (Mukendi 2005: 55).

The same study also showed that there are some hindrances that journalists encountered in their use of ICTs. For instance, limited access to internet facilities and resistance by their managers to adapt to new technologies were listed as some of the constraints. The study concluded that there was need to generally improve the use of ICT tools such as the internet in newsrooms, and

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that the lack of ICT policies in newsrooms was a big challenge that needed to be addressed.

Additional proof of the impact of the internet on the work of journalists can be derived from a 2012 to 2013 study by this author to investigate the level of use, scope and impact of the internet on journalism. The study not only concluded that the internet has had a positive impact on journalism, but also that it has influenced journalists to engage more with news consumers, a factor that has helped give the media new credibility in the eyes of the public; the media now are seen as a part of the society rather than bystanders or observers in the quest to achieve objectivity (Mambwe 2013).

However, the study also revealed that further favourable impact is affected by factors such as: the high cost of having access to the internet and other communication technologies; and very low levels or no internet infrastructure in some parts of the country. In the study that involved 10 news managers or editors, representing 10 media houses, and 50 journalists, it was further observed that there still exists a serious need for improved internet skills for journalists if the internet's potential benefit is to be fully exploited.

Before the year 2000, very few media houses and journalists had internet connections. Significant changes become noticeable at the dawn of the millennium. By 2004, more journalists had begun using the internet than ever before (Mambwe 2013) and this increase has continued to the present day. As this has happened, certain important trends have arisen that are key to this reflection on the internet and the media. These are:

- a. *Mobile internet*: increased mobile telephony has brought about new ways of accessing the internet. Zambia's three mobile cellular providers are now major ISPs and journalists are benefiting from these facilities that are also relatively cheaper.
- b. *Online media*: these have emerged and are offering alternative voices to the traditional media. They often allow readers to comment, discuss and share content, making them very popular. Examples of online media include: *Lusaka Times*, *The Zambian Watchdog*, *Zambia 24*, *Lusaka Voice*, *Kitwe Times*, *Tumfweko* and *The Zambian*.
- c. *Social media*: social media have emerged as tools that many journalists are using in their work. The various available tools have created an environment of interaction and debate for the journalists and news consumers. Additionally, journalists are also using social media to monitor public debate, contribute as citizens to these debates without the requirement of being objective as would be required in their media houses, and obtain story ideas. Most media houses have developed a strong social presence, especially the private media. Some such as Muvi TV (@AskMuvi) use content from these platforms as part of their programming.
- d. *Citizen journalism*: as a result of the internet, more and more ordinary Zambians are practising citizen journalism particularly on social media platforms. Stories obtained from citizen posts and tip-offs are increasingly finding themselves in the traditional media.
- e. *Zambian blogosphere*: owing to increased connectivity and access, the blogging community has emerged and continues to grow. Journalists now also have personal blogs where they can report beyond what is in their official media outlets.

The future of internet technology and the media

As the internet in Zambia clocks 20 years, it is clear that a lot has been achieved in this period, even though there still remains a lot to be done, especially when one considers that the country was one of the earliest in Africa to have this facility. It is clear that there are



still a number of challenges that need to be addressed if internet penetration and development is to be improved.

Generally, there are a number of other issues that may be points of focus for the country relating to the internet. These include: the urgent need to achieve universal access to ICTs for all, including the differently abled; improving on the country's cyber security infrastructure; and significantly reducing the cost associated with accessing the internet or to investing in the sector. Besides these, there is need to find means of ensuring child online protection and safety, and perhaps more importantly and urgently, is the need to initiate and complete the process of harmonising the policy, regulatory and legal framework that governs the internet sector so as to make it efficient and progressive.

For the media, one of the major concerns going forward will be whether or not internet regulation will affect freedom of the press. There have been statements,

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though few, from government officials hinting that the state may want to have more control on the internet due to increased criticism and opposing political activity. The government has raised several concerns over the seemingly reduced adherence to ethical guidelines particularly with the online media, and media outlets such as *The Zambian Watchdog* have had their websites blocked from time to time. This issue is a major point of contention with the media and how it will be dealt with will be interesting to observe.

As a projection, it is expected that several policy decisions will have to be made to deal with some of these areas of interest with the media. Whether these will be progressive or retrogressive, only time will tell. Also, while internet penetration is poised to increase year by year, the use of online media platforms, including social media platforms, will also increase, a move that will see more interaction between journalists, newsmakers, and audiences. This will lead to further revision of the role of the journalist.

The future of the internet in Zambia is that of potential, not only for the media, but in all aspects of life. However, for this potential to be realised, positive shifts will have to be made by stakeholders responsible for the development of the sector. Twenty years have gone by leaving us with the feeling that maybe we could have done better. The approach for the next decade or two should be one that is focused on transforming the nation to meet its goal of becoming an information and knowledge based society. And so as the 50th independence commemorations and national reflections take centre stage this year, the achievements, failures and future of internet technology in Zambia should not be forgotten. After all, it's also the sector's birthday.

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Endnotes

1. <http://www.techrends.co.zm/telecoms-cat/latest-statistics-mobile-internet-subscriptions-zambia>